



Connecticut Department of Public Health

Testimony Presented Before the Committee on Human Services

March 1, 2022

**Commissioner Manisha Juthani, MD
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**House Bill 5040, An Act Concerning the Governor's Budget Recommendations
for Human Services**

The Department of Public Health (DPH) supports House Bill 5040, which implements the Governor's budget recommendations for human services. These proposals include adding behavioral health services and practitioners to the Student Loan Repayment Program (SLRP) in order to expand access to needed healthcare in underserved communities. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important issue.

The SLRP will support primary care providers working in Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA) to meet health care workforce needs within Connecticut and assist in meeting the following long-term goals: increased access to primary care services and behavioral health care services, decreased health care disparities, and improved overall health outcomes in HPSA communities. Access to primary medical, behavioral health, and dental care is an important prerequisite for good overall health. A lack of primary health providers creates access barriers for low-income, publicly insured, uninsured, and geographically isolated residents.

Section 1 of the bill broadens SLRP direct service programs to be inclusive of behavioral health services, and expands eligibility through redefining "primary care clinicians" to include psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed clinical social workers, licensed marriage and family therapists, and licensed professional counselors. Improving access to mental health care is one of the Health Resources and Services Administration's clinical priorities for state loan repayment programs.

Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been an increased demand for mental health care in Connecticut that has not been met. The United States Surgeon General recently declared a nationwide childhood mental health crisis, consistent with the challenges we are facing in our state. Financial assistance to help behavioral health care professionals repay student loan debt will promote a diverse workforce that addresses this critical service need.

Thank you for your consideration of this information. DPH encourages committee members to reach out with any questions.

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